L’KHA DODI became a favorite Friday night hymn almost as soon as it was written. Its author, Shlomo Halevi Alkabetz (d. 1576), was a participant in the mystic circle in Safed, associated with the great master, Moses Cordovero. The poem is one of many written by Safed poets in which Shabbat, God, and Israel are intertwined and related through love. The depiction of Shabbat as bride and as queen has a long history of talmudic origin. The stanzas form an acrostic spelling out the author’s name, Shlomo Halevi.

L’kha Dodi juxtaposes two simultaneous movements: reaching toward the Divine and the Divine reaching toward the human. Thus, we are invited to go and greet Shabbat as she comes to us. The mystics added that this drawing close was not only between God and the human, but described an inner process of Divinity.

The poem serves as an introduction to Psalm 92, “The Song of the Day of Shabbat,” which was the start of the Friday evening service in many rites, before the introduction of Kabbalat Shabbat.

COME, MY BELOVED L’kha Dodi. The “beloved” who is invited here may refer to the soul, to others within the community of Israel, or to an aspect of the Divine. The first half of this refrain contains fifteen letters and the second half contains eleven, which are respectively the numerical equivalents of yod-hei and vav-hei, spelling out the name of God.

“OBSERVE” AND “REMEMBER” שומן וזכור. The Decalogue appears twice in the Torah, with minor differences of wording. In Exodus (20:8), the fourth commandment opens with the verb zakhor, “remember” the Sabbath day; the Deuteronomy (5:12) version begins shamar, “observe” the Sabbath day. Harmonizing them, a midrash states that God uttered both words at once (Mekhila, Bahodesh 7). Evoking that midrash here, the poet thus alludes to the unity established by Shabbat; for God, thought and action are one. And on Shabbat we, too, may feel as if who we are and how we behave are more unified.

LET US GO OUT TO GREET SHABBAT לקראת שובה לרב בלוכה. This verse alludes to the practice of leaving the synagogue and going out into the fields to welcome Shabbat, the custom followed by the mystics of Safed, based on their interpretation of the Babylonian Talmud (Shabbat 119a).

SHRINE OF OUR SOVEREIGN מזドイツ ממלכה. This verse and the next five all build on the theme of Israel’s exile and her promised redemption. Shabbat is seen as a manifestation of the Shekinah (God’s presence in the world), which is in exile with Israel. At the same time, Shabbat is also a foretaste of the redemptive time.
We rise and turn toward the entrance.

לבח דודי לקראת כלת, פיני ששבת בקברלה.

You will spread out. The subject here is ambiguous: “you” can simultaneously refer both to the Shekhinah and to the people Israel.

Scion of Peretz’s Line

At the end of the Book of Ruth, David’s genealogy is traced back to Peretz, one of Judah’s sons. The verb p-r-tz (which also appears in the word tifrotzi, “spread out,” in the first line of this stanza) means “to break through,” and the use of this name, “son of Peretz,” for the Messiah has a dual meaning here. The human “fall” from the Garden of Eden came about by breaking God’s command, and the redemption will come by breaking through the world of sin.

Facing the Entrance.

Shabbat has been personified throughout this poem. At this point, it is as if that personification, the bridal queen, enters the synagogue. The congregation turns toward the entrance and bows to greet her. Then, as she moves to the forefront of the synagogue and takes her place on the bimah, the congregation turns toward the front and bows as she is enthroned next to the ark. Shabbat has arrived and the service proceeds with Psalm 92, “The Song of the Day of Shabbat.”